CONSIDER THE LILIES

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INDEPENDENT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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What in the world is the church doing — sponsoring an Arts Festival?

I am asked that almost as frequently as "Why do I have to confess my sins every Sunday when I haven't had enough time to commit any this week?"

And "Why are you always asking me for money?" Next to those two questions — I am asked most frequently — "What is this all about — the Church's arts festival?" Isn't art pretty far afield from the religion business? After all, we have a fine museum, and good classical music stations, and lots of galleries. Why does the church have to be involved in the arts?

Part of the answer is that we always have been. What, after all, would be left of our civilization — our music, drama, poetry, sculpture, painting — if somehow we could excise everything that expressed theological or biblical themes, or was supported by the church? Not much. We had the privilege of traveling in Rome and Florence last summer. Perhaps Renaissance art would have thrived in whatever culture existed at the time. But to stand before the Pieta, or Bernini's angels, or Fra Angelica's incredible painting of the annunciation — is to know that there is more than a passing relationship between religion and art: that art has been enhanced and enriched by the great theological themes of Christian faith, as well as the opposite: the celebration and communication — evangelically — of those themes by the best of our artists — Michelangelo, J. S. Bach, etc.

And so part of the answer is that the relationship is traditional. But there's more than that, and the rest of it is interesting and fun and, besides, you didn't bring me all the way down here to say something that simple. So let me begin with a story.

Fourth Presbyterian Church, like Independent Presbyterian Church, sponsors an Annual Festival of the Arts. There is an exhibit, usually two major concerts or recitals, one of which is presented by our own musicians and the other of which is ordinarily a performing artist of some reputation: Dave Brubeck, Paul Winter, Maya Angelou, Ramsey Lewis, and Robert Shaw. In addition, the church always either commissions or arranges to display in our courtyard on Michigan Avenue, or around our building, some unique, creative sculpture or outdoor art. We've had a huge sail attached to the base of our steeple with the boom stretching all the way across the top of our cloister, until Chicago's wind threatened to pull down the steeple or launch the whole building across Lake Michigan. We've had stainless steel sculptures on the theme of the Root of Jesse; a series of contemporary benches to sit on. One delightful entry was a number of huge, metal musical instruments — 20 feet high — which you could pluck, rub, pound or rattle to make urban music. We're intentional about it. Part of what we hope to do is get people to look and ask — What's that all about? It's not easy to do in a busy urban environment — especially Chicago, with its fierce wind which in the fall starts coming at us out of the Northwest plains — we know it as "the Hawk." There is a Chicago way of walking on Michigan Avenue, in front of the Church, sandwiched between the 96-story Hancock Tower and 70-story Bloomingdale's Building and the 70-story Water Tower Place — that is, an enormous wind funnel — which captures the Hawk and ratchets it up a few knots. So Chicagoans walk with their heads down, leaning decidedly into the wind and they often are totally covered up and are in a hurry to get inside. You really have to hit them with something on Michigan Avenue if you want them to stop and look and ask metaphysical questions.

The best was the Tree Wrapping. We retained a Milwaukee artist, Marian Vieux, whose medium is brightly colored strips of plastic, with which she wraps trees, starting at the bottom and proceeding up and out each limb. The strips sometimes are one color — so a tree may be bright red or yellow. Sometimes they are alternating stripes,

gold, black, orange. People noticed. Marian wrapped two big trees in our courtyard and eight in front. Some thought we had gone over the wall. Some thought the trees were sick and it was a kind of medicated wrap. Some hated it — although I could never quite understand why.

In the middle of it I was meeting with one of our church school classes — elementary school children — and I asked them if they had seen the trees. They had. "Why do you think the artist wrapped the trees?" I asked the children. And as children often do, they understand with perfect simplicity and clarity something adults make unnecessarily complex. "To make people look at them," they said.

Exactly. It is, I believe, part of the mission of an urban church to say to the city something Jesus said one day to his friends — "Consider the lilies."

It is in the Sermon on the Mount, a precious collection of Jesus' teachings about life, human destiny, human priorities. It is important material. It is singularly relevant. "Do not be anxious about your life ... Look at the birds of the air. Consider the lilies ..."

"Lilies of the field," as a matter of fact, was an idiomatic way of referring to wild flowers. It has been suggested that the scene is the mountain side, and that perhaps behind Jesus, or off to one side, was a sweeping, gradual incline of bright Scarlet Anenomes which looked like a giant, royal robe. "How many times have you walked by a field of flowers like that and not even seen them?" he was asking. You are so tied up in anxiety about your life, so tied up in knots over what to wear to work tomorrow, or what's for dinner, or how in the world you will get done what you have to get done this week, that you have quite forgotten the steady grace that energizes the whole universe. You are so tight you are acting as if the whole world depends on you and your schedule. Relax. Lighten up. "Consider the lilies."

It was an important word for them. It is even more important for us, for our emotional and mental and spiritual health.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote:

> "Earth's crammed with heaven,
> And every common bush afire with God;
> But only he who sees takes off his shoes -
> The rest sit 'round it and pluck blackberries."
> [Aurora Leigh, Book VII, line 820]

People were always asking Georgia O'Keefe why she painted those huge, wonderful flowers and what the flowers meant. She didn't like the question much because she thought the answer was so evident. Once she said —

> "Most people in the city rush around so, they have no time to look at a flower. I want them to see it whether they want to or not ... it occurred to me to paint a flower so huge that it would make New Yorkers stand still and contemplate it."

The first item on Jesus' agenda was to get his friends to stop worrying long enough to see the beauty in front of their eyes; and then the connection between the beauty and the love of the one who created the beauty. Jesus wanted to save their souls, a part of which in this instance had to do with beholding, helping them to be able to see beauty in the common, the holiness which is part of the ordinary. "Look at what God has made." It is a very welcome word, spoken quietly today in the midst of a civilization which seems designed to increase and enhance anxiety, to urge us to run faster and push harder, to keep our shoulders to the wheel, eyes on the goal, feet moving in the right direction, calendars full, schedules loaded. "Consider the lilies." The lilies — or the trees — don't need our help, of course. But we have boxed them in so thoroughly, and boxed ourselves in with the anxieties that are produced by our pace of life, that we do need the gracious word of Jesus, or the gentle reminder of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, or O'Keefe's wonderful flowers, or the wrapped trees. Look at what God has made!

Art says that, and does that, whether it starts out to say and do it or not. In arranging shapes, color, words, sound, art is conveying a sense of the wonder and beauty of the world. Sometimes art has to clamor for our attention. Sometimes the music has to be insistent and dissonant and the shapes abrasive and the colors raucous. Sometimes art has to work hard to persuade people to see.

One of the first experiences of the wonder of art I had was seeing a print of Van Gogh's "Starry Night." It is an astonishing picture. I love it so much I persuaded my first Session in a small blue collar church in the steel region of Northern Indiana to include a few dollars in the building fund for art and we bought a print and had it framed. (Someone looked at it and said — well — that looks like something our nursery kids could do.) In any event I just read a paragraph in a book by a scientist — "A Naturalist's Search for God" in which he wrote:

> "Van Gogh saw something in the night sky that is not to be found in any star map I have seen. He saw the stars as vortices of color, and not as white dots. Van Gogh's stars are huge multi-hued cyclones that pull us up by the hair and empty us out of the Earth like water from a broken vessel."

Art grows out of a deep reverence and love for the world. Art and religion, that is to say, begin at the same starting point, and are siblings, Ted Gill has observed. We're about the same business. Artists and priests always stand a little outside, a little out of step, and under tyranny are often sharing the same jail cells. Both start with wonder and awe before the mystery of creation, gratitude for the created order, celebration of the world and everything in it.

Sometimes words alone are not sufficient. Sometimes the affections of the heart demand a gesture. And so when we want to say "I love you" we buy a rose bud. When we want to convey deep sympathy, we make a casserole, or when we want to say thank you to God we build a cathedral or write a poem or sing a hymn. That's why sacred liturgy has employed chanting — because saying the words doesn't quite get the meaning expressed. John Calvin was arguably one of the greatest intellects ever to think about the meaning of Christianity. The great truths of faith, Calvin said, should be put to music. Creeds should be sung, not recited, so as not to give the impression that all the truth to which they point may be exhausted by our descriptions of it.

Art and religion both originate with a deep reverence for the world. How sad it is, therefore, that so much conventional religious expression seems to tilt in the opposite direction, away from the world.

The Biblical tradition begins with a story that invites the reader to fall in love with the world. The creation account in the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis contains an important and radical word about creation and the creator. It is a word which is similar to what Jesus said to his disciples. "Consider the lilies." It is a word that is often missed in the debates about historical accuracy, biological precision and the exact historical time frame. The word here is that there is one God. God is good. God's creation is good; in fact, it is very good.

The first people to read Genesis 1 — or more probably to hear the story — needed a word from the Lord. Their lives — their very existence as a people was in danger. Defeated by the Babylonians, captured, taken to a foreign land and held in exile, the children of Israel were subjected to all the pressures which living in an alien culture could exert on them. In addition, Babylonian religion — which must have seemed very appealing — exposed them to one of the oldest religious ideas around, namely that there were at least two gods: a god of the heavens, the spiritual places, and the god of the world, the creator of the earth. The tangible world was suspect in Babylonian religion, tempting, sensual, sinful, ultimately evil.

God's people needed a saving word, and what they got was a poem about creation: a work of art which contains important truth — saving truth. The wonderful theology in Genesis contains the radical assertion that creation is good; that the creator is deeply committed to the creation; that the process of creation is still going on and that God's people have a part in that process.

Christianity has always had to work hard not to come across as world-denying, world-hating, world-avoiding piety. At times we have acted as if "natural" meant "lower," "evil," "bad"; as if God made a mistake when we were created with bodies and appetites. We have celebrated celibacy and tried to ignore or deny sexuality. And so we

have, at times, been suspicious of the arts precisely because they were so worldly. We were suspicious of sculpture precisely because it celebrates the beauty of the human body and dance, because it celebrates the beauty of human movement and painting, because it celebrates the sensual beauty of the world: apples and pears and human bodies, water lilies, grain stalks, iris, and starry night.

In our more extreme and least attractive moments we have turned on the arts as a threat following the Reformation; for instance, zealous reformers in righteous zeal ripped intricately carved wood screens out of the cathedrals and smashed the sculptures and burned the paintings and outlawed musical instruments. Huldrich Zwingli, it is said, personally supervised the white-washing of the Cathedral walls in Zurich. Fortunately the inclination to beauty is so deep within us that when it is stamped out in one place it emerges at another. Even in the Nazi death camps people wrote poetry and drew pictures. And so Protestantism developed its own forms of beauty — in spite of itself. But in some Highland parishes to this day you will not find even so much as a cross — so suspicious were our forebears of tangible, sensual beauty.

But what if our greater sin is loving the world too little, not too much? What if the genius of both Judaism and Christianity is a profound love for the created order precisely because God created it and it is good? What if the better morality is a worldly morality based on the premise that the world and everything in it is part of God's intention?

Non-religious observers suggest that the environmental crisis is only possible for a civilization that does not reverence the creation. Ecologist Lynn White, for instance, holds religion responsible for the unfeeling, uncaring exploitation of the natural world by our civilization. And moral philosophers continue to ponder the meaning of our uninterrupted willingness to spend our treasure making weapons, chemical and nuclear, the effect — if not the purpose — of which is to reverse the creative love of God by making war on all of life. Perhaps we don't need more other-worldly piety. Perhaps we need to fall in love again with God's world ... Perhaps we need most to "Consider the lilies."

It is deep within us, that love is. The little children knew immediately why the trees were wrapped. When you visit a museum and see those graceful small figurines carved four thousand years ago — men, women, horses, children — think about what it means that the artist, the person who did the carving, was not hunting or gathering food in a time when providing food was a total occupation. Ponder how near the essence of humanness art must be because those primitive societies somehow concluded that what the artist was doing was important. We are the creatures on the evolutionary ladder, Rollo May wrote, who paused, picked up a burnt stick and drew a picture on a cave wall.

At Lascaux, France, on the walls of the caves are beautiful paintings of bison, horses, deer, enormous black mammals with curly hair, and the hand prints of the people who painted them — 15,000 years ago.

It's as if there is an eleventh commandment which Moses forgot to include in the first ten, Rollo May suggested. It's as if the creator said:

> "Thou shalt make thyself and thy world beautiful, for this is why I sent my gardeners, Adam and Eve, to cultivate the flowers in Eden. And this is why I have made the twilight and the springtime so radiant with splendor." [*My Search for Beauty*, Rollo May, p. 230]

It is our lot, it seems, to be anxious. To be human is to worry. "What, me worry?" strikes us as a funny thing to say precisely because we know how much of our lives we invest in worrying. Jesus knew that his friends were worrying about this and that: about things they could control — like food and clothing; and about things they couldn't control — like physical size and how long they would live. Jesus knew that to be human is to be anxious.

We have a highly developed capacity for worry. We can worry about food and clothing; about the test we have to take and the report to complete. We can work up a fairly severe case of anxiety about the money we don't have, the behavior of our children, or the sermon we have to write. Sometimes we awake at 3:00 a.m. anxious about ... we don't know what.

How interesting that Jesus' prescription — the content of his response to the basic dilemma of our humanness — was not a lengthy sermon, not a philosophical argument, but art. "Consider the lilies" he said. The God who loves the world enough to make this beauty loves you. The God who created the world can be counted on to love you, to be gracious to you, to care for you forever. Jesus' response to the basic human anxiety is an invitation to see, to enjoy with the senses, to fall in love with the world.

The real trouble with that worrying is that when you're worrying you're not living as fully as you could be living.

2,500 years ago, a Hebrew poet wrote:

> "One thing have I asked of the Lord,
> that will I seek after:
> That I may dwell in the house of the Lord
> all the days of my life,
> to behold the beauty of the Lord."

What a lively idea that is — "to behold the beauty of the Lord."

Those crusty old Presbyterian theologians in the 17th Century might not have been very enthusiastic about Michelangelo's nudes and cheerful Renaissance music — but they knew the essence of the Biblical word when they wrote a catechism and began it like this:

> "What is the chief end of man?"
> "Our chief end," they answered, "is to glorify God
> and to enjoy God forever."

Edna St. Vincent Millay gathers that up for me ... I get it out every October and read it:

> "O world, I cannot hold thee close enough!
> Thy mists, that roll and rise!
> Thy woods, this Autumn day, that ache and sag,
> And all but cry with colour!
> Lord, I do fear
> Thou'st made the world too beautiful this year."

Jesus said "Consider the lilies."